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Rhythmic prose in *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien

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Abstract. Concerns rhythmic prose in *The Lord of the Rings* novel by J.R.R. Tolkien which, though extensively represented the novel, is seldom considered in most research papers. The novel contains over 70 poetic texts and should be viewed as a complex prosimetrum, as multifarious interconnections between prose and verse is an integral part of *The Lord of the Rings* poetics. The marginal manifestations of this mixed style, such as rhythmic prose, are of special concern. The recognition and further analysis of most non-occasional fragment of prose metre in the novel may be fully accomplished only with due regard to other Tolkien's works (especially from the Legendarium) and the peculiarities of his style (both in poetry and in prose) in general. Considering three selected fragments of rhythmic prose, we aim to specify their connections with some songs and poems either from *The Lord of the Rings* itself, or outside the novel; the context and rhythmic pattern of another fragment develop possible allusions even to hypothetically existing texts within Tolkien's literary world and poetic traditions of the people of Middle-earth. The variety of the representation of rhythmic prose in *The Lord of the Rings* is far from being limited to the mentioned categories, and further research is required.

Keywords: J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings, rhythmic prose, verse-like prose, prosimetrum, poetics.

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Ритмизованная проза в романе Дж.Р.Р. Толкина «Властелин колец»

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Аннотация. Рассматривается ритмизованная проза, в значительном объеме встречающаяся в центральном романе Дж.Р.Р. Толкина «Властелин колец» и практически не попадавшая в поле зрения исследователей. «Властелин колец» предстает комплексным прозиметром, включая свыше 70 стихотворных текстов, и исследование особенностей взаимодействия стиха и прозы является существенным для описания его поэтики. Особенный интерес представляют пограничные случаи такого взаимодействия, в частности ритмизованная проза, распознание «неслучайных» фрагментов которой требует пристального изучения не только контекста романа, но и других, относящихся к Легендариуму Толкина текстов, учета специфики авторской художественной манеры (равно поэтической и прозаической) в целом. Анализ трех избранных случаев возникновения ритмизованной прозы в романе показывает, что их стихоподобие может быть обусловлено тем или иным влиянием поэтических произведений автора – как представленных в самом романе, так и находящихся вне его, а также существующих гипотетически, в рамках созданного Толкином мира и поэтических традиций населяющих его народов. Многообразие форм ритмизованной прозы во «Властелине колец» не исчерпывается проанализированными примерами и нуждается в дальнейшем научном осмыслении.

Ключевые слова: роман, фэнтези, автор, традиция, стихоподобная проза, прозиметр, поэтика

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Introduction

The works by J.R.R. Tolkien continue to come into researchers' notice. His signature novel *The Lord of the Rings*, however thoroughly analysed through the lens of narrative, motifs, genre peculiarities, religious, historical and mythological context, and from a variety of other perspectives, is still in want of special researches concerning the interconnection between verse and prose in the novel, though Tolkien's stylistic reliance upon medieval poetics (Saintsbury, 1914, p. 14), especially of Old English

literature where these two were notably close to each other, was considered repeatedly (Shippey, 1992, p. 177). Being a prosimetrum of the second type which contains verses written by the author himself (Bartoňková, 2008, p. 7), *The Lord of the Rings* demonstrates a remarkable variety of verse forms (Russom, 2000, p. 53) and poetry genres (Kulmann, Siepmann, 2021, pp. 230–231), that have a powerful impact on prose context. According to our calculations, there are 74 separate poetic texts (for a total of 1126 verses), most of which are diegetic from the narrative point of view and represented as the songs sung by characters at the pinnacles of the "rhythmic pattern" of the novel (Le Guin, 2002, p. 106). This enhances the role of each interchange between prose and verse significantly and evokes certain instances on the border, such as rhythmic prose. Bearing in mind that arguably any complete analysis of the prose rhythm cannot be achieved solely by the recognition of all the verse-like fragments within the prose text (Girshman, 1982, p. 21), we still focus on such instances of rhythmic prose that were supposedly influenced by Tolkien's poetry, either from the novel or outside it. In this paper, we only aim to illustrate the variety of this influence from the example of three prose fragments.

Rhythmic prose and poetry from the novel

One of the most common sources of rhythmic prose in *The Lord of the Rings* is semantic and partially textual link to the verses from the novel itself, not necessarily placed in the closest context. In the fourth book (the least abundant in terms of poetry), soon after their meeting with Faramir, Frodo, Sam, and Gollum approach the Cross-Road and look at the ancient royal statue depicting a king of Gondor and defiled by the Orcs and other slaves of Mordor; its head replaced by a hideous boulder with the Red Eye lies below:

Suddenly, caught by the level beams, Frodo saw the old king's head: it was lying rolled away by the roadside. 'Look, Sam!' he cried, startled into speech. 'Look! ***The king has got a crown again****!'*

The eyes were hollow and the carven beard was broken, but about the high stern forehead there was a coronal of silver and gold. A trailing plant with flowers like small white stars had bound itself across the brows as if in reverence for the fallen king, and in the crevices of his stony hair yellow stonecrop gleamed.

'They cannot conquer for ever!' said Frodo. And then suddenly the brief glimpse was gone. The Sun dipped and vanished, and as if at the shuttering of a lamp, black night fell (Tolkien, 2012, vol. 4, p. 137).

This episode is fraught with strong symbolic meaning and has some previously noticed intertextual elements (in particular, a possible allusion

to *Ozymandias* by P. Shelley – Hammond, Scull, 2005, p. 485). This "*brief glimpse*" crowning the head of the stony king with gold and silver almost literally, may symbolise the triumph of light and beauty over darkness and cruelty. Albeit the second phrase of Frodo is followed by the "*black night*" (seemingly denying his words), this cannot be associated with the inevitable victory of the dark power in the wide context of Tolkien's Legendarium. "*In the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach*", as Sam thinks, much further in the novel, watching a single star whose light is seen even through the heavy clouds of Mordor (Tolkien, 2012, vol. 5, p. 137). According to eschatological myth, Morgoth (a "devil" in Tolkien's universe) shall find a way to break the Door of Night and return to the circles of the world (Arda); however, he shall be utterly destroyed in Dagor Dagorath (Battle of all Battles), and after that the world shall be made anew unstained by Morgoth's evil (Tolkien, 1992, p. 333).

Considering religious and philosophical ideas of J.R.R. Tolkien, we may arguably suggest that the defiled statue of the king is a symbolic representation of the Fallen man, as the Fall was a recurrent topic in Tolkien's letters, and even *The Silmarillion* was described by the him as a text that is *mainly concerned with Fall, Mortality, and the Machine* (Tolkien, The Letters, 1995, p. 145). Evil, despite of its primordial origins in Legendarium, is spreading mainly through the hearts of Men, the bearers of Melkor (Morgoth) lies. Yet golden and silver light (its duality is also an essential leitmotif in Tolkien's works, presented most remarkably in the image of the Two Trees of Valinor), "*the light of art undivorced from reason*" (Tolkien, The Letters, 1995, p. 148) still lingers in the world and brings hope for redemption and the triumph of truth, however many were the faces of the returning shadow.

Yet we are especially concerned with another interpretation of the given fragment which presumably makes the poetic metre (iambic tetrameter) in Frodo's first phrase a non-accidental issue. Without the context of the novel, the verse-likeness of this line should be viewed as an occasional feature, though Y.B. Orlitskiy recommends four feet of disyllabic metre (or three feet of trisyllabic metre) as a "sample" metrical minimum for considering any prose phrase as a rhythmical unit (Orlitskiy, 2002, p. 49); for English speech and literature where occasional metres are somewhat more common (Antipova, 1984, p. 64), this conventional number may be increased by one foot at least. Therefore, the uncoincidental rhythmisation of Frodo's line should be proved by rather textual and thematical connections to the Riddle of Strider (about Aragorn), internally composed by Bilbo and cited fully in Gandalf's letter to Frodo (Tolkien,

2012, vol. 1, p. 224) and then by Bilbo himself at the Council of Elrond (Tolkien, 2012, vol. 2, p. 42):

> *All that is gold does not glitter,*
> *Not all those who wander are lost;*
> *The old that is strong does not wither,*
> *Deep roots are not reached by the frost.*
> *From the ashes, a fire shall be woken,*
> *A light from the shadows shall spring;*
> *Renewed shall be blade that was broken,*
> ***The crownless again shall be king**.*

The last verse of this riddle foreshadows the return of the crown (and the throne) of Gondor to the heir of Isildur with Aragorn's coronation in the final chapters of the novel. The moment when the head of the statue is also returned to its rightful place according to Aragorn's orders is especially illustrative: "*The hideous orc-head that was set upon the carven figure was cast down and broken in pieces, and the old king's head was raised and set in its place once more, still crowned with white and golden flowers*" (Tolkien, 2012, vol. 5, p. 186). Frodo should remember this Bilbo's riddle and, whether conscientiously or not, he cites the line adapting it to the situation and using less "poetic" metre (the poem is originally written in amphibrachic trimeter). Even in Frodo's second (*They cannot conquer for ever!*) we may detect either iambic trimeter with extended second foot or amphibrachic trimeter with shortened first foot, if we accept that Frodo uses non-abbreviated verb form (*cannot* instead of *can't*) not only for style elevation.

Rhythmic prose and poetic traditions of Middle-earth

The textual link between the rhythmised prose fragment and poetry of Tolkien's literary universe may be not only factual (i.e. with a reference to any existent text within the novel), but also potential and hypothetical. This can be illustrated with the words spoken by Glóin the Dwarf who recalls the rise and fall of the dwarven kingdom of Khazad-dûm (Moria): *'**Moria! Moria!** [//] **Wonder of the Northern world!** [//] **Too deep we delved there**, [//] **and woke the nameless fear**. Long have its vast mansions lain empty since the children of Durin fled…'* (Tolkien, 2012, vol. 2, p. 33).

We could represent the rhythmic pattern of the words in bold (reading *delved* like *delvèd* which is not uncommon in English poetry) as follows:

ÚUU|ÚUU // ÚU|(Ú)U|ÚU|ÚU // UÚ|UÚ|UÚU // UÚ|UÚ|UÚU.

This assumptive "poetical" reading, as well as the whole verse-likeness of the phrase, would be almost baseless, even in the light of the rhythmically

repeated name of the kingdom (*Moria! Moria!*) and a slant rhyme (*there – fear*). Yet the direct meaning of the sentence and its context do allow such suggestion. Glóin (whose speech is much more extensive) speaks feelingly, even signs (*Glóin signed*), though the solemn elevated style of his words conceals his affection. The loss of Khazad-dûm is one the greatest catastrophe of the Dwarves aggravated by their own partial fault in Balrog's awakening (who is hinted at by this indirect nomination — the nameless fear). The event itself was not, as far as we know, turned by Tolkien into any separate poem, and the song of Durin (the only dwarven song in *The Lord of the Rings* sung by Gimli in Moria) is remarkably bereft of any allusion to the real reason of the catastrophe (Tolkien, 2012, vol. 2, pp. 133–134). Still such songs could not but exist hypothetically within Tolkien's world, at least in oral poetic tradition of the Dwarves; therefore, Glóin might recite some lines from these songs. In that case the lines might be not "original", but rather adapted and translated into Common Speech, as Khuzdul (the Dwarvish) is almost sacred language kept in secret from other Peoples of Middle-earth (Tolkien, 2012, vol. 2, pp. 133–134). We may also assume that Gl in recalls the lines from two individual songs, the first of which praises the glory of Moria (in Elder Days when it was true "wonder of the Northern world"), and the second one laments over its fall and the flight of the survived dwarves. Any of these suggestions are bound to remain theoretical, yet they make the appearance of poetic metre in Glóin's speech somewhat less occasional.

The instances of rhythmic prose possibly connected to such "lost tales" from various fictional poetic traditions frequently appear in the novel, allowing Tolkien (in addition and in contrast to the poems actually introduced in *The Lord of the Rings*) to maintain the effect of depth of the imaginary world as well as to create a certain suggestiveness akin to our incomplete impression from reading ancient literary texts, that forms, to some extent, the core of Tolkien's stylistic method, both conscious and instinctive (Tolkien, The Letters, 1995, p. 225). The complete analysis of these instances, however, falls beyond the scope of this paper, as our goal is to consider the variety of the sources of prose rhythmisation. The last example is evoked by more external factors.

Rhythmic prose and poetry outside the novel

In the scene of the departure of the Fellowship from Lórien, Galadriel gives the phial with the light of Eärendil's star to Frodo:

'*And you, Ring-bearer,' she said, turning to Frodo. 'I come to you last who are not last in my thoughts. For you I have prepared this.' She held up*

a small crystal phial: it glittered as she moved it, and rays of white light sprang from her hand. 'In this phial,' she said, 'is caught the light of Eärendil's star, set amid the waters of my fountain. It will shine still brighter when night is about you. May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out. Remember Galadriel and her Mirror!'

Frodo took the phial, and for a moment as it shone between them, he saw her again standing like a queen, great and beautiful, but no longer terrible. He bowed, but found no words to say.

***Now the Lady arose**, and Celeborn led them back to the hythe* (Tolkien, 2012, vol. 2, p. 213).

There could be almost no reason to treat the words in bold as a verse-like fragment (even though the rest of the sentence shows amphibrachaic structure), if it did not resemble phonetically the very beginning of one of the earliest poems from the Legendarium that describes one of the main characters of Tolkien's mythology whose name it arguably owes its birth to. We refer to E rendil, who is just above-mentioned in Galadriel's words to Frodo, and to Tolkien's poem known as *The Voyage of Éarendel the Evening Star* (1914). This early piece begins thus: "**Ëarendel arose** where the shadow flows // at Ocean's silent brim..." (Tolkien, 1995, p. 267).

The name of the characters is consonant with "Now the Lady", and the similarity of the verb (*arise*) with its poetic elevated usage fortifies this cohesion. We may speculate – as the context supports this idea – that Tolkien wrote this episode having his early poem in mind, and thus, whether intentionally or not, he added this rhythmical and phonetical autoreminiscence to this episode in the novel (which, moreover, deals with the departure and journey by water as well). However external this reference might seem, it is in fact deeply connected with the mythological background of *The Lord of the Rings*. The phial of Galadriel plays a vital role at Cirith Ungol and further, while the name of Ëarendel is mentioned frequently in a variety of contexts with Bilbo's song as the most prominent mention (Tolkien, 2012, vol. 2, pp. 24–28) that harkens back to the early verses, extended and reshaped.

Conclusion

We have considered only three examples of rhythmic prose in *The Lord of the Rings* and demonstrated the variety of the textual and thematical sources of its verse-likeness, including Tolkien's poems from the novel, outside the novel, and even the "unwritten" texts, whose existence in Tolkien's literary world is hypothetical. Other numerous instances of rhythmic prose in *The Lord of the Rings* (from Tom Bombadil's speech,

fully rhythmised, to elaborate system of transformed and invented proverbs – Clinton, 2014, p. 133–134) along with the verses themselves urge us to regard *The Lord of the Rings* as a complex prosimetrum, the complete analysis of which remains to be accomplished.

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